World of Topicals:
Circus Stamps of the World

By John F. Dunn

(Note: In addition to providing visitors to StampNewsNow with coverage of the Circus Stamps of the World, this article also is an example of the coverage that is enjoyed by subscribers to StampNewsOnline. To learn more about that online-only magazine and how to subscribe for a full year for just $9, please go to http://www.stampnewsonline.net/.)

The 2014 United States Vintage Circus Posters sheet and the Vintage Circus Souvenir Sheet, both pictured here, have attracted renewed interest to stamp collecting in general and the Circus on Stamps theme in particular.

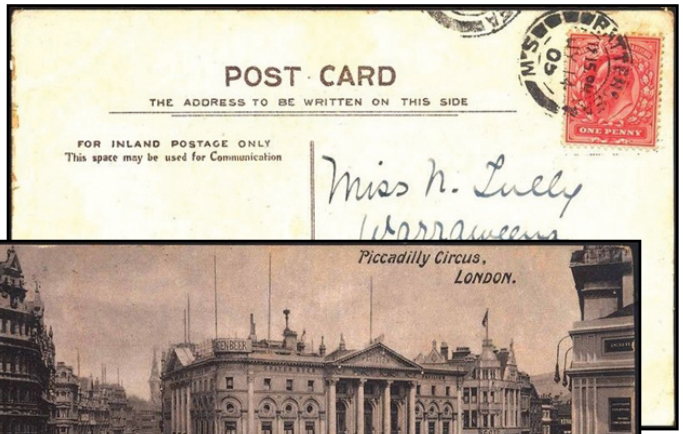
It should come as no surprise that a theme as popular as the circus should be featured on many stamps, and in this review we will present a sampling of the stamps, covers, and other related collectibles that can be part of a Circus on Stamps collection.

To find more than enough examples for this assemblage all I had to do was run an internet search for Circus Stamps. With that I was presented with hundreds, if not more than a thousand, choices. As a result, and because I wanted to attract new collectors using the Circus theme, this article will be in two parts.

What you will see here is 'only the beginning,' and it will then be continued on our StampNewsNow articles archive.

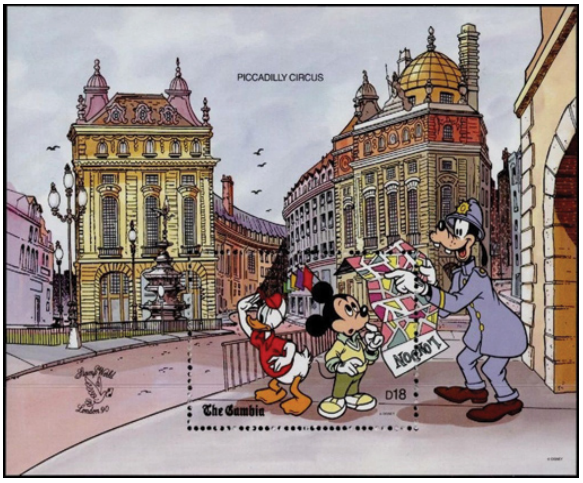
And just as there is a tremendous array of Circus stamps from which we can choose, there also are scores of informative sites where we can find background on the circus and its history. I will provide two website links for your use at the end of the complete article; for my purposes, I relied on the free access Wikipedia site. So let's take a look at the Circus on stamps and covers and how to collect them.

* * * * *



The first thing to keep in mind is that "circus" as we know it today is very different from how it originally was used. The word actually derives from the Latin *circus*, which is the romanization of the Greek *kirkos*, meaning "circle" or "ring".

In Ancient Rome, the circus was a ***building*** (not an event) for the exhibition of horse and chariot races, equestrian shows, staged battles, gladiatorial combat and displays of (and fights with) trained animals. The first circus in the city of Rome was the



Circus Maximus. After being rebuilt several times, the final version of the Circus Maximus could seat 250,000 people. Shown on page 1 is a stamp from a Tunisia set of 2nd-5th century Roman Mosaics, in this case picturing Circus Specatators.

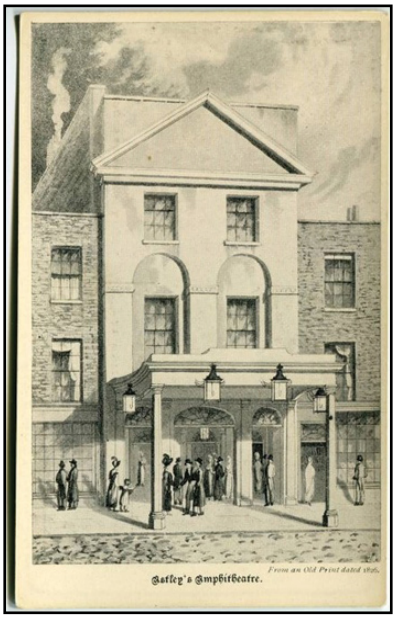
After the fall of Rome, large circus buildings fell out of use as centers of mass entertainment. Instead, itinerant performers, animal trainers and showmen travelled between towns throughout Europe, performing at local fairs.

And while on the subject of what is **not** a circus as we know it today, Piccadilly Circus, in London, is a traffic circle, not an event. Instead, going back to the Roman "circus" it is the open area and junction in London's West End, built in 1819 to connect Regent Street with Piccadilly.

We see on page 1 a picture post card and here on a Gambia souvenir sheet showing Mickey Mouse and Daisy Duck get "directions" from London Bobby, Goofy.

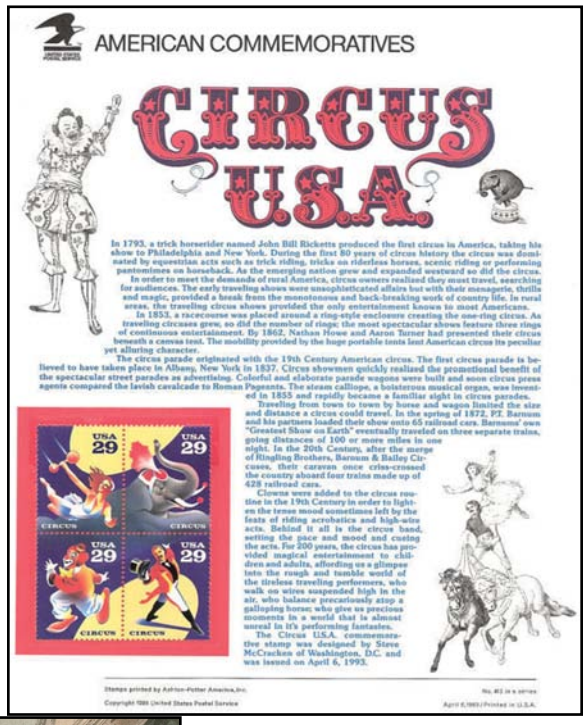
These two pieces are examples of the range of material that can be included in a Circus Stamps Collection—"circus" being what we know and enjoy it as today.

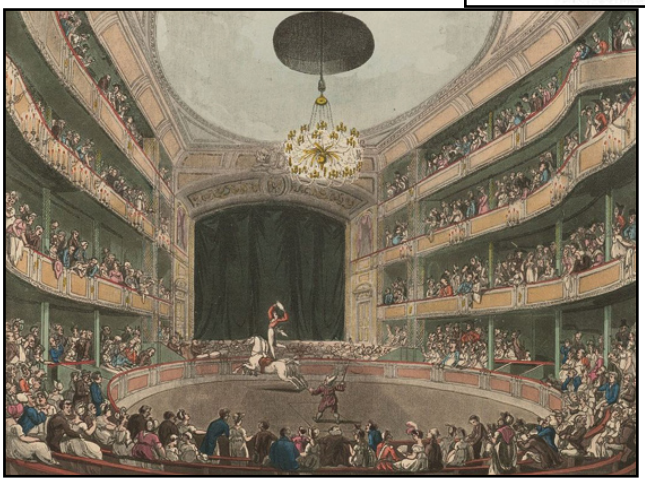
Philip Astley is credited with being the father of the modern circus, when he opened the first circus in 1768 in England. His early circuses were almost exclusively demonstrations of horse riding tricks demonstrating equestrian skills. He was not the first to present such perfomances, rather he was the first to create a space where all these acts were brought together to perform a show. His Circle, later known as a Circus, was



presented in the Amphitheatre that is shown here in an illustration from Wikipedia and in a photo card. [ºI was surprised that I could not find a stamp for Astley and the first circus. If anyone knows of one, let us know. JFD.]

On the other hand, we do have commemoratives for the first American Circus. The Englishman John Bill Ricketts brought the first modern circus to the United States when he established his circus in Philadelphia where, on April 3, 1793, he presented America's first complete circus performance. Later that same season, George Washington attended a performance of the Ricketts circus!





Shown above is an Artcraft first day cover for the American Circus Bicentennial block of four stamps, issued on April 6, 1983, picturing Ricketts. We can now also consider other forms in which we find Circus Stamps collectibles.

Shown here is a Commemorative Panel produced by the U.S. Postal Service, and on page 3 is the front cover of a Ceremony Program presented to collectors who attended the first day of issue ceremony, which was held in Washington, D.C.

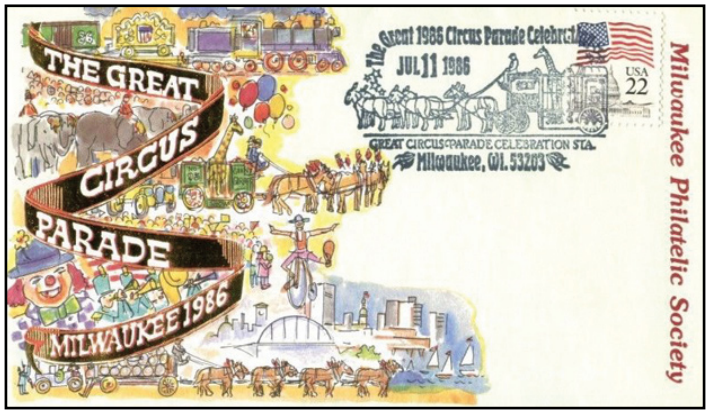
The American circus was revolutionized by P. T. Barnum and William Cameron Coup, who launched P.T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie & Circus, a travelling combination of animal and human oddities. Following Barnum's death, his circus merged with that of James Anthony Bailey, and travelled to Europe as The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show On Earth.

The 2014 U.S. Vintage Circus Posters sheet was issued on May 5 in Sarasota, Fla., the former winter home of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and the continuing home of The Ringling Museum, whose Tibbals Digital Collection includes the original circus posters on which the eight stamps were based.

Finally, before turning to a display of Circus Stamps of the World, as well as other related collectibles, we should address the concerns that have been expressed about the treatment of circus animals. Animal welfare groups have documented many cases of animal cruelty in the training of performing circus animals, and while progress has been made and individual cases of cruel treatment have been successfully prosecuted and eliminated, much still needs to be done.

In addition, contemporary, or *nouveau cirque*, focus less on animal acts and more on the use of lighting design, original music, and costume design, often staged in theatres rather than in large outdoor tents.

And on that note we will turn to a display of Circus Stamps of the World.

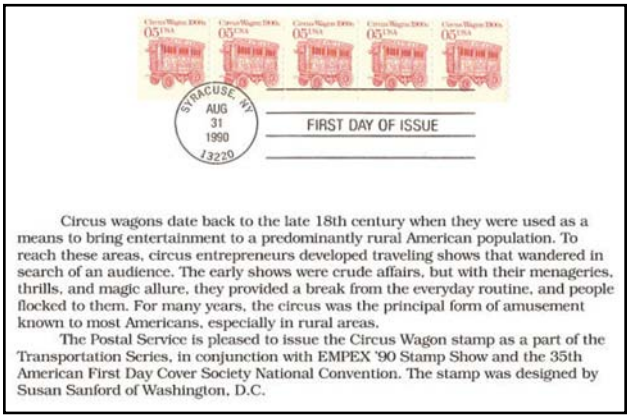


Other forms in which Circus Stamps can be collected are pictured here.

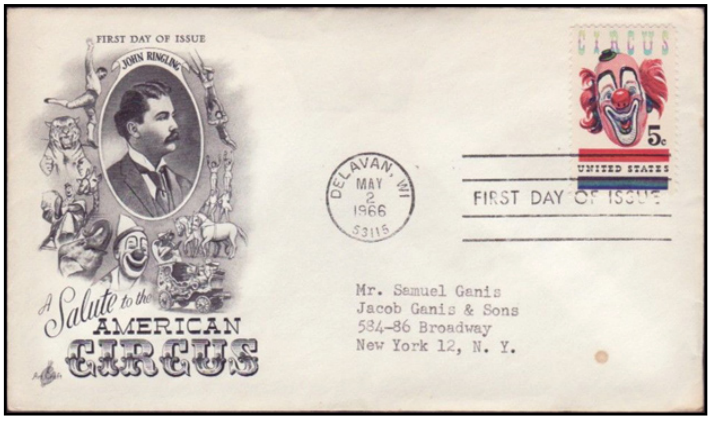
Above left is an "event cover" that was part of an annusl series for Milwaukee's Great Circus Parade.

The two stamps are of interest to "EFO" (Errors, Freaks and Oddities) collectors before they are imperforate errors, lacking the vertical perforations with which the regular coil stamps were issued—this pair having a Scott Catalogue value of $350.

And in this righthand column we see the front cover and the inside page for a Ceremony Program for this same 1990 Circus Wagon Coil stamp in the popular Transportation Coil series.



Another United States issue—the first to salute the circus—was this 1966 single stamp, seen here on an Artcraft First Day Cover (FDC) that includes a portrait of John Ringling. The stamp honored the 100th Anniversary of Ringling's birth.



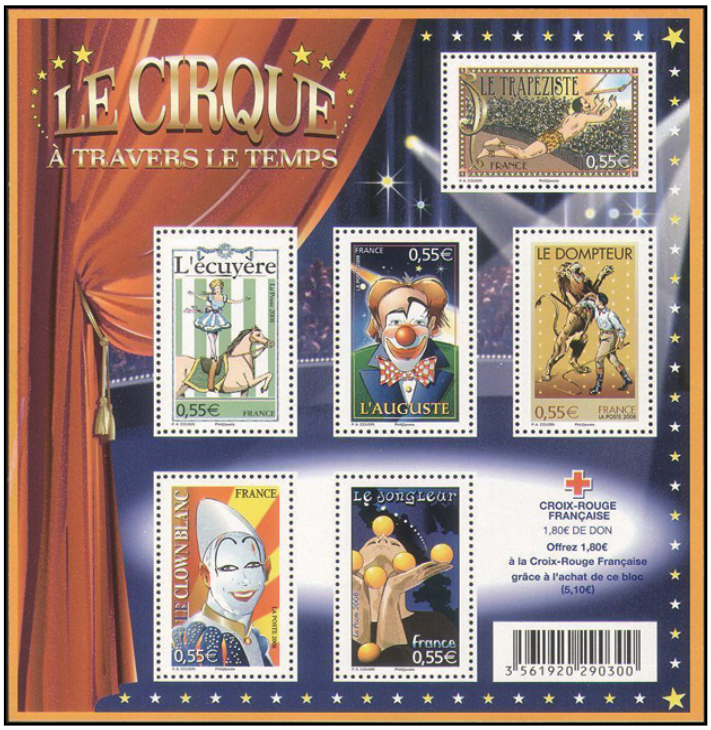
Here's a group of stamps that can be part of a mini-collection. The International Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo, in Monaco, has been held since 1974. The Principality has issued stamps for the event since the first one, above left, to the most recent 38th Festival in 2014. and was the first of many international awards for circus performers. Also shown above left is the 2000 sheetlet for the 25th Festival.

Among the highlights of the Festivals is the awarding of the Clown d'Or (Golden Clown) award as well as awards for other circus skills.

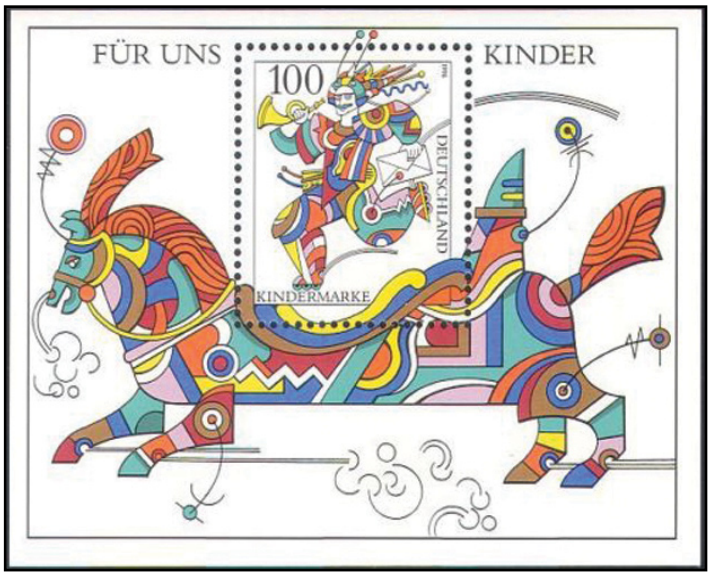
In 1998 Canada issued a set of four Circus stamps. They were issued in a booklet pane containing three of each design. In addition they were produced in this souvenir sheet.

The most famous contemporary circuses is Canada's Cirque du Soleil circus company, whose shows have been seen by nearly 90 million spectators in over 200 cities on five continents.

(Note that Canada has two official languages, English and French, thus "Le cirque" and "Circus" on the souvenir sheet.)



As in many instances, Circus stamps are issued as fund raisers, with a portion of the proceeds going to charity. A portion of this French 2008 issue went to France's Red Cross Fund.



These Germany (Berlin) 1989 and Germany 1996 Circus Issues raised money for Youth Welfare

Bäste abonnent!
Vi på PFA tackar för visat förtroende under år 1987 och hoppas att vi skall motsvara Era förväntningar under kommande år.

Dear Subscriber,
The PFA would like to give you a special present and we look forward to having your support in the future as well.

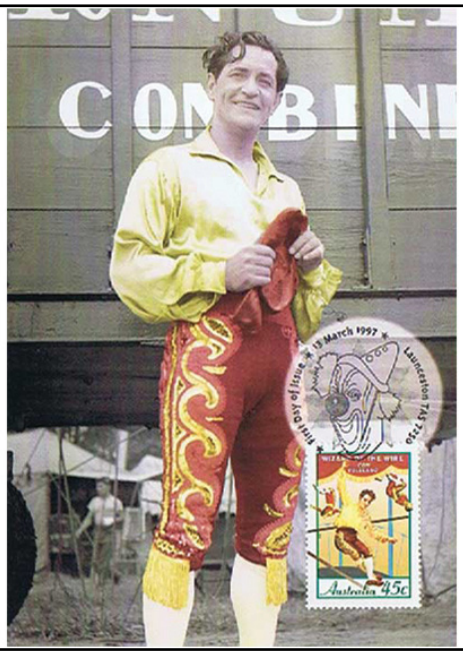
Sehr geehrte Abonnenten!
Wir danken Ihnen für das uns im Jahr 1987 entgegengebrachte Vertrauen und hoffen, dass wir auch im kommenden Jahr Ihre Erwartungen nicht enttäuschen werden.

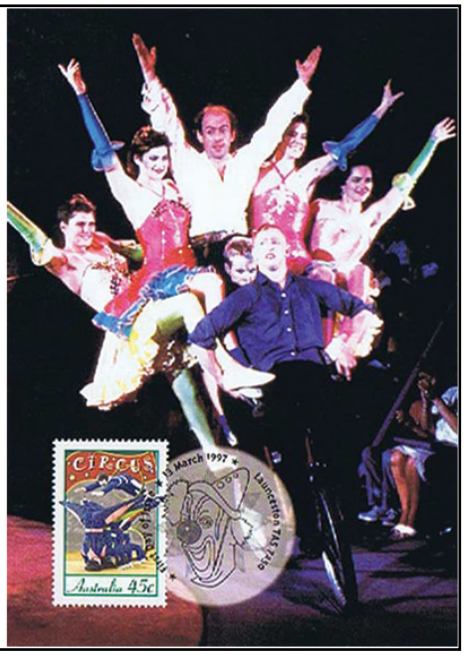
Anna-Greta Waldemarsson
Verkställande direktör
Managing Director
Geschäftsführende Direktorin

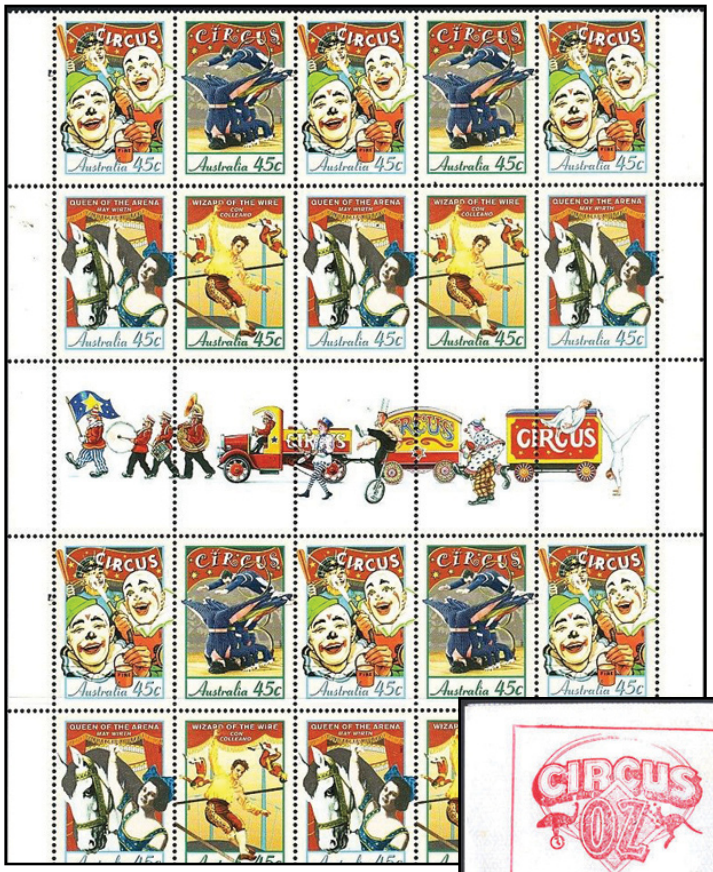
PFA:s gåva utgörs av ett specialtryck i tre produktionsstadier av utgåvan "Svensk cirkuskonst 200 år", som gavs ut den 10 oktober 1987.
Nederst: endast stältryck i 2 färger, svart och blått
I mitten: stältryck plus 2 färger offset, blått och rött
Överst: stältryck plus ytterligare 2 färger offset, gul och rosa dvs den färdiga produkten

The Swedish Postal Administration produced this Test Print, or progressive proof, of its 1987 Circus Set, showing various stages of the color printing. It was given to its new issue subscribers with the message, "Dear Subscriber, The PFA would like to give you a special present and we look forward to having your support in the future as well.

Shown below is the pane of stamps as issued.







The displays above are Maximum Cards that depict the performers, and below we see still another collecting form, a "commercial cover" that was used by a business in regular mail, in this case with a red, rubber stamp, cachet.

On this page we see a 1997 issue for the 150th anniversary of the Circus in Australia. The stamps honor Mary Wirth, Queen of the Arena; Con Colleano, Wizard of the Wire; and clowns and tumblers.

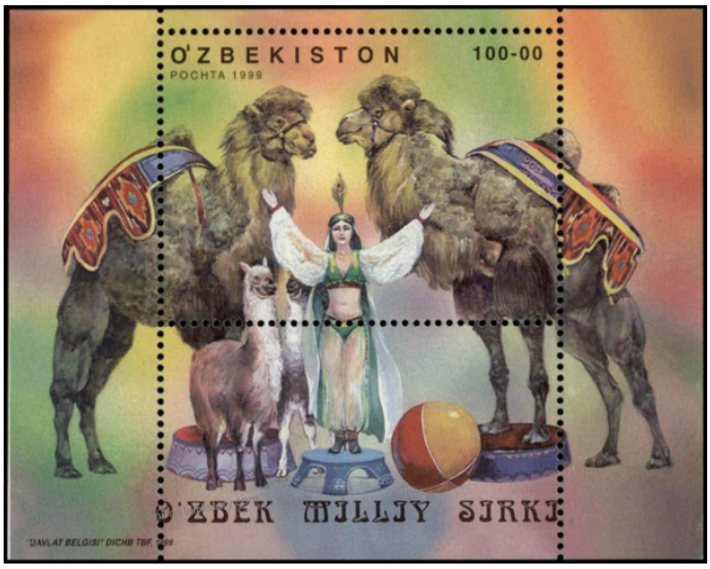
The sheet also shows a "gutter" with its own decorative, non-stamp design.

Another approach to a Circus Stamps Collection is to focus on popular Circuses.

First we see a First Day Cover from Russia with stamps saluting Moscow Circus performers and a souvenir sheet picturing the home of the six-ring Moscow Circus.

St. Thomas & Prince Islands, located off the coast of West Africa, produced souvenir sheets, left to salute Canada's Cirque de Soleil and right, for circuses from England, Russia, China and Germany.

And in this souvenir sheet Uzbekistan, the former Soviet republic in Central Asia, honors the Uzbek Circus, with a souvenir sheet that, instead of elephants used in most ciruses, features huge Bactrian Camels and llamas.



Each year the nations of the European Community issue stamps in a common theme. In 2002 the Europa theme was the Circus. Shown here are a few examples that can be part of its own mini-collection.

Circus performers on a Great Britain First Day Cover as well as one featuring the Mills Circus.

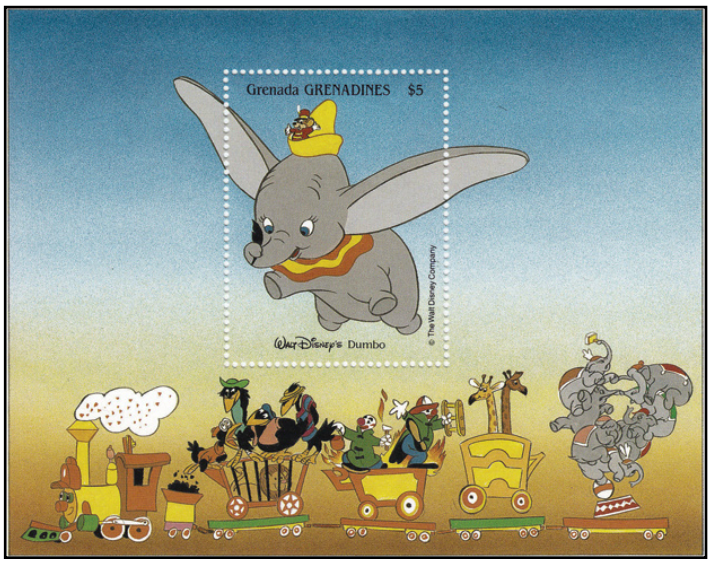
Austria packs various aspects of a circus into one single

while Yugoslavia spreads it out over a souvenir sheet with a single stamp surrounded on all sides by a pictorial margin.

This Guinea-Bissau souvenir sheet honors Isaac Van Amburgh, an American animal trainer who developed the first trained wild animal act in modern times. He became famous for such acts of daring as placing his head inside the jaws of a wild cat.

Even though he also was known for his brutal treatment of his animals, Van Amburgh remained very popular and died a wealthy man.

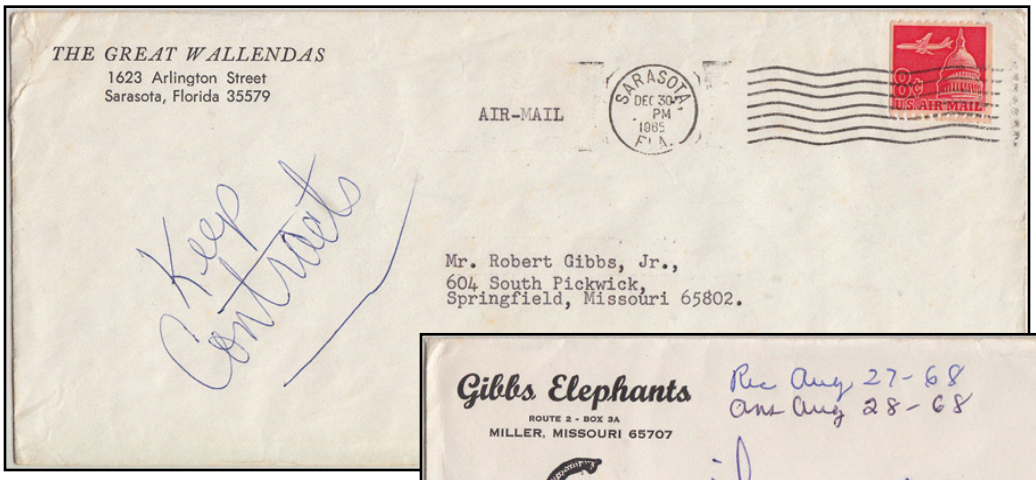
The circus also is a background for many movies, ranging from the tragic *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* to *Dumbo*, with its typical Disney happy ending.

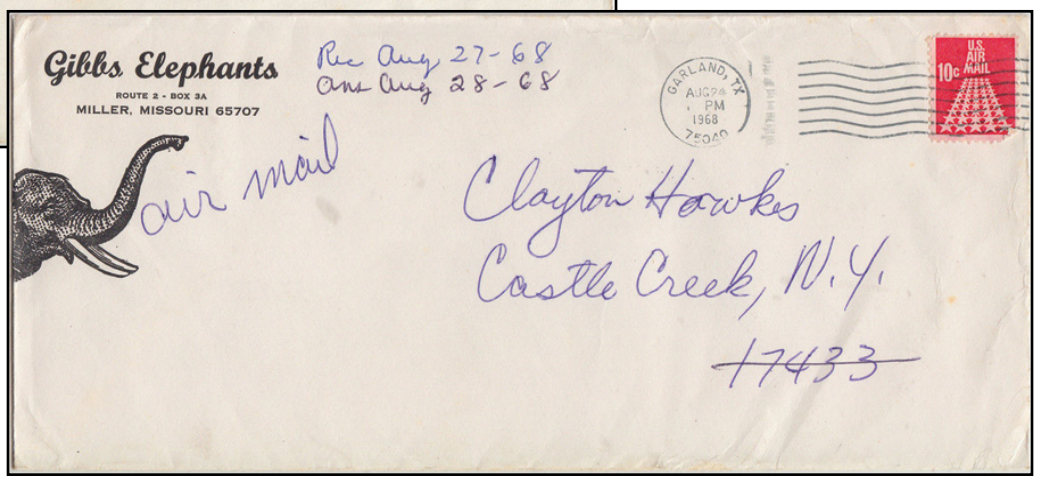


Given the appeal of the circus to youngsters, one oddity is the scarcity of stamps showing youthful spectators. The closest I came in my search was a Bulgarian stamp **designed** by a youngster and featuring circus performers.

And for any stamp picturing spectators of any age—young or old—the only one I found is a North Korean stamp commemorating Monaco's International Circus Festival, picturing the late Prince Rainier III and Monaco's ruling family.

And among the unusual shapes, we have this triangle stamp within an Equatorial Guinea souvenir sheet, with the perforations extending through the margins.

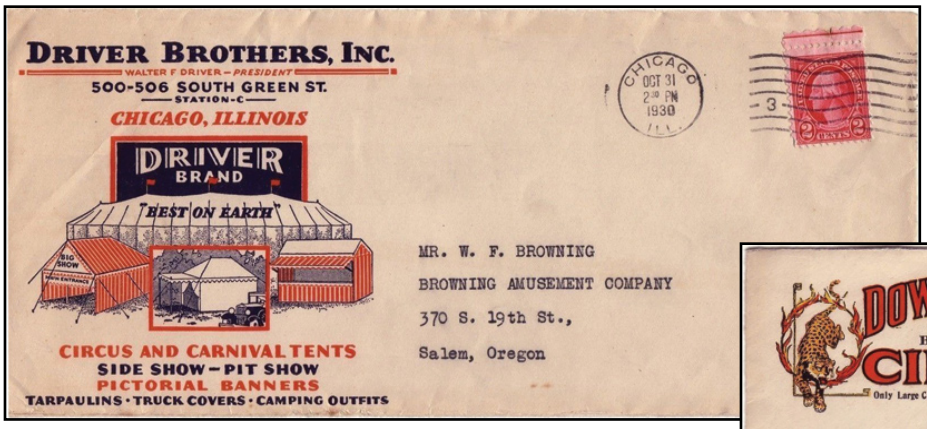


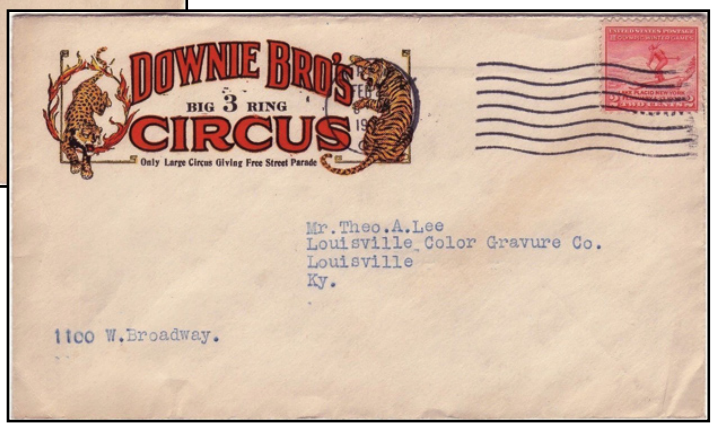


Here's an interesting pair of covers. The top cover is a 1965 Great Wallendas mailing to Mr. Robert Gibbs, Jr., with the notation, "Keep Contracts."

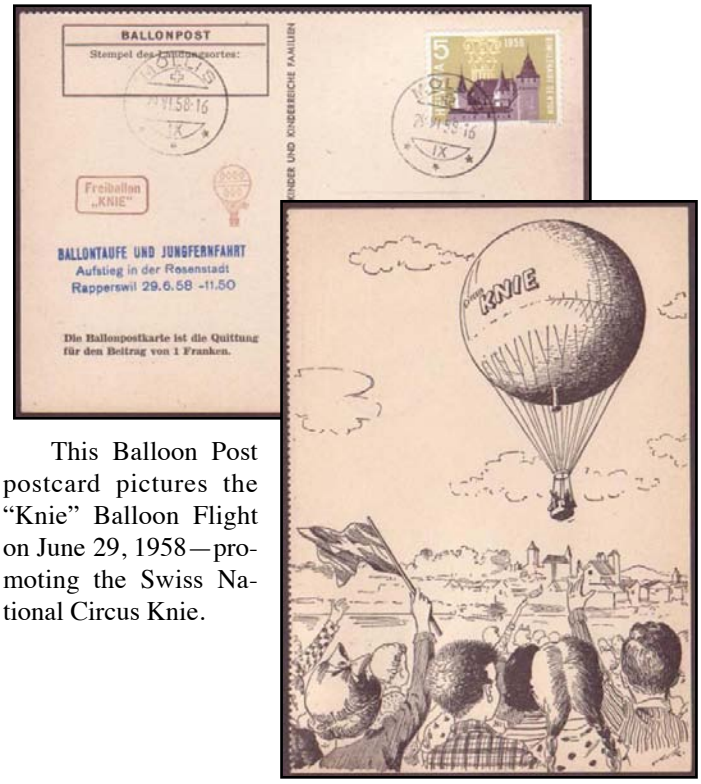
As it turns out, in my search I stumbled across a 1969 cover mailed by Gibbs Elephants, obviously the same Gibbs to which the Great Wallendas envelope was addressed.

I was unable to find a cover for Clayton Hawkes; however, at http://www.circushistory.org, I found this: "Martin Bros. Circus was owned by Clayton and Madge Hawkes. The winterquaters for the show was in Castle Creek, NY. It toured in 1936 in upstate NY. The local circus enthusiasts have a club called the "Martin Bros. Circus". Martin Bros was tent show. Clayton and Madge had other shows over the years including Clayton's Combined, Bogart and Hawkes, and the Great American School Show.…"





Finally, a few odds and ends.



This Balloon Post postcard pictures the "Knie" Balloon Flight on June 29, 1958—promoting the Swiss National Circus Knie.

One of hundreds of Vintage Circus Posters First Day Covers that can be assembled in a collection is a hand painted set created by Nirlay Kundu, one imaginative example shown here.

Other collecting forms include promotional "poster" stamps such as the one above created to promote a German circus.

And at the right we see a set of stamps that are identified as issues from the P. T. Barnum Local Post. Locals are private issues created for actual use by private mail carriers. In this case it would appear that it is from the category of "fantasies" that some collectors create.

As promised, here are those two other Circus websites that might be on interest to you:

http://www.pbs.org/opb/circus/in-the-ring/history-circus/

http://www.circopedia.org/SHORT_HISTORY_OF_THE_CIRCUS